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The UMB Pulse Podcast

Just Engaged: Meeting Your In-Laws for the First Time

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00:00 | 58:29

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Dana Rampolla: 0:00

So I'm not sure if I told you that my daughter who got married last summer is expecting our first grandchild next month.

Charles Schelle: 0:05

Congratulations.

Dana Rampolla: 0:06

Yeah, we're so excited. Our family's growing first with a new son-in-law and now a grandbaby. It will certainly be a new adventure for us.

Jena Frick: 0:13

That's so interesting. Has it been kind of tough for you being this far away from her during her pregnancy and everything? Especially cuz it's the first one for you, you know?

Dana Rampolla: 0:20

Yeah, it really has been Jenna. I mean, FaceTime's great, but it doesn't replace being there in person. And it's kind of funny because I think not only have we gained a son-in-law, but we've kind of gained

a whole new set of other people in our family. Right. I mean, I guess his, his family, they're sort of our in-laws now. Right?

Charles Schelle: 0:37

Yeah. And, and you're probably at this point taking those Buzzfeed surveys, like which in-law am I trying to figure out if you're the good or the bad one?

Dana Rampolla: 0:44

Yeah, I, I think that's what I need to do more. Like, am I the controlling one or, or the favorite one? Who swoops in for a fun times or to help with the big project? I don't know. I mean, I think it's interesting. I, I guess maybe for me personally, it's a little challenging just trying to navigate all these new relationships, long distance. My family, my husband's family, we were all local, so we saw everybody all the time, but this long distance stuff is kind of tricky.

Jena Frick: 1:07

And you've had a, you've had a couple different big family events happening for your kids, right? So you got the grandchild coming and you had a wedding recently. Uh, lots, lots of really great stuff happening for you. Dana . Dana Rampolla: Yeah. Lots going on.

Charles Schelle: 1:21

Well, you know, it's, it's great that we're, we're talking about this because when you think about it, between like Christmas time, Hanukkah, New Year's, Valentine's Day, a lot of people are getting engaged, right? You get proposed and then everyone's elated. Well guess what?. You're making a new family, but you also gotta meet the in-laws. Right. Gotta know how your , wife, to-be's, mother is and the father is how that boundary's going to going to go. So

Jena Frick: 1:49

yeah, it's what romantic comedies are made of. Right,

Charles Schelle: 1:53

Exactly right. Like just go and Google and just type an in-law movie and just like see the pages go by and by and by. So yeah,

Jena Frick: 2:01

I can think of a few off the top of my head. Um, and you know, speaking of all of that, our two guests today, uh, are really well versed on the topic of in-laws and relationships with your in-laws. Our two guests today have surveyed more than 1500 in-laws, so that way you don't have to . We have professors, Geoff Griff and Michael Wooley from the University of Maryland School of Social Work here today, and they're the authors of the book in-law, relationships, mothers, daughters, fathers, and Sons, which was published back in 2020

Dana Rampolla: 2:50

All righty. So welcome Geoff and Michael. I'm hoping you might be able to give me some guidance as I navigate my own family trajectory, but also help our listeners who are new at this in-law game too. Before we get to my personal therapy session recorded for everyone, let's get to know you gentlemen a little bit.

Charles Schelle: 3:07

Absolutely. So, um, let's talk a little bit about how the both of you came to work together prior to this research. Um, how long have you been at U M B and, and, uh, how did you make a, a good, uh, guess working couple ? Michael Woolley: Yeah, we need to Geoffrey already did that in in the past may, maybe maybe men, colleagues. Geoffrey has been, he is the longest serving faculty member in the

school of social work. As a matter of fact, I think he told me the other day, he is the longest serving employee in our building.

Geoff Greif: 3:43

Correct.

Michael Woolley: 3:43

So he has been around a long time. I, I joined the school of social work a dozen years ago and, um, uh, Geoff and I came to do research together. Geoff actually came to me and proposed an idea. He had done a lot of research about, about families and social relationships and, um, we have both kind of shared backgrounds and skills as clinicians, uh, working with families. Uh, my orientation is toward children and adolescents. Uh, Geoffrey has orientations largely toward adults, but also work, you know, as I said, working with families. So we share that background and then we have complimentary research skills. I have quantitative research skills, running statistical analyses, uh, analyzing data collected with surveys, which is what we've done together. And, and, and Geoffrey's, uh, primary, uh, skillset is, uh, is qualitative, interviewing people and, and going about a systematic analysis of what people tell us about their family relationships and their experiences. And so what we've done together is, uh, our, largely our exclusively mixed methods studies where we both interview people and collect that kind of data and analyze it, and we survey them with questions that the answers can be, uh, quantified and then statistically analyzed for meaning. And we combine the findings from those two things. And we've done two big projects together, published two books, and we're working on the third, currently. One, one about adult sibling relationships. One about in-laws, uh, in-law relationships, father, mother, son and daughter-in-law relationships. And we're working on one now with another of our colleagues, Victoria Stubbs, on interethnic and interracial marriages. We tend to do projects about under studied family relationships. We have a lot of knowledge about parent-child relationships, about sibling relationships when kids are young and live at home, and about spousal relationships. Um, these other relationships we don't know a lot about.

Charles Schelle: 6:01

You mentioned the, the book that both of you co-authored

in in 2020 "In-law Relationships: 6:04

Mothers, Daughters, Fathers, and Sons," will be a big part of this episode. You touched on it a little bit, so what motivated you to research in-law relationships?

Geoff Greif: 6:17

As Michael said, we've been looking at family relationships and we've studied, um, and I've spent a lot of time on what I call horizontal relationships, which would be friendships, male friendships, couple friendships, siblings. Now, we thought it was time to even that out and look at the other axis and go to look at this incredibly important horizontal relationship that everybody knows something about. Because if you've known your grandparents and one of your parents, you have watched your father or mother interact with their mother or father-in-law. And so we all have grown up in context where this intergenerational relationship is so important. And of course, it continues to go south or go the other way, not just north to your parents and grandparents. If your children partner or get married, you're gonna be also, uh, living in a, uh, a parent in-law, a situation with children in-law. You might be a, a, a child in-law if you have a partner, and you might be a sibling-in-law if you're one of your siblings, uh, if you have them gets partnered or married. So it's a wealth of important, interactions, relationships that sit at this, this axis of how we handle our horizontal relationships, but also our vertical relationships.

Jena Frick: 7:46

So in this book, you look at the new axis of relationships and conducted a study about in-law relationships. Can you tell us a little bit about the group of people who are part of that study?

Michael Woolley: 7:58

So the initial stage of the study, and this is what we've done in every study. We start by doing, qualitative interviews with an accompanying initial version of a survey. Geoff will teach an advanced research course so that we have a cluster of master's students who get trained in interviewing techniques and collecting survey data. They will go out and Geoff and I also do interviews and surveys, and we'll collect this data. Um, we get samples and, you know, up to a hundred plus more than a hundred here. Um, we analyze that data. We, we learn a lot from that initial data collection. And that can be a, a, a fairly varied group of people. We ask these students to interview people they know, interview people that they, uh, that have one or two degrees of freedom away from them that may fit, you know, someone with adult siblings, uh, someone who has in-laws, et cetera. Um, and we've also done some creative kind of opportunities to collect such data. One time we took a train together to New York City to give a book talk at a New York City library, and we, screened, uh, recruited, uh, consented individuals on the train on the way to New York and interviewed them. So, we get as varied sample as we can doing that. What we learned from that, we then use to develop the original survey. Ask, add questions, adapt questions, maybe drop questions that we found, didn't learn meaningful things that we wanted, we'll, we'll create a longer survey. And then using the online survey platform, Qualtrics, we will survey a large sample. Um, for example, for the in-law book, we, we surveyed about 1200 folks, in the neighborhood of 300 son-in-laws, daughter-in-laws, mother-in-laws, and father-in-laws, which was also a sample that was diverse, um, ethnically. Our original data collection is regional, right? But when you get into Qualtrics, you're getting folks from all over the country. Um, you get a larger, more robust sample, you can draw more, more generalizable results from the findings cuz it's more representative by people and place. And, and then we combined the findings from the original samples, the quantitative Qualtrics surveys. We sometimes continue to do interviews. We sometimes do specialized interviews, like for the sibling book. We, we interviewed a group of siblings, uh, and had the opportunity to learn from them about their experiences, adult siblings with them all in the room and interacting with each other. And that was pretty interesting too. So it's quite a very, uh, set of methods and, and, and ways of learning about that particular family relationship.

Jena Frick: 10:57

That's so interesting. I bet you have like some pretty cool anecdotes about, you know, interviewing families all together in one room and, and surveying people on public transportation. That's pretty wild and really cool.

Dana Rampolla: 11:10

Um, I'm curious if you can share a couple of interesting, I, I'm not sure if I'm using the right word, but data points or data inferences that you just overarching that you got from this research. So, you know, maybe do people who get along well with their in-laws have a lower divorce rate, or do people usually argue about the mother-in-law versus the father-in-law? Were there any just interesting things that are just short little snippets you can give us?

Geoff Greif: 11:38

Yeah. One of the interesting things that we found, and Michael and I are very attuned to issues around gender. So we're looking for our, our own feelings about gender. We're looking at, at how, uh, other people view gender. So we need to bring that in. So it looks like, and it's not surprising maybe, but it was, you know, not what we are hoping for. That men, in many of these families where there are, we're talking about in-law relationships now that fathers in-law and sons-in-law are a little bit

more of, of the wallpaper. And the, and the furniture are more the, the women, more the mothers in-law and the, the daughters-in-law that they are taking up more of the central heart of many families. And it may be that men unconsciously collude to not get very involved with each other. Uh, so fathers in-law and sons-in-law in general do not play as central a role as do mothers in-law and, and daughters-in-law. So there's the whole issue about what are the tropes around mothers in-law, where the tropes are around sons-in-law, struggling with mothers in-law. We didn't really find, uh, those tropes to be true. In fact, one of our findings was that both sons-in-law, And daughters-in-law feel closer to their mother-in-law than to their, their father-in-law. So again, we we're looking at it and in need to embrace and recognize the continued centrality of women to the family across the, the, the, the lifespan. Another thing that we found is that when we ask people we ask, say, daughters-in-law and the mothers in-law, how close are you? Uh, how much do you trust um, the other and so on. Pretty much across the board, the mothers in-law, um, describe with their daughters-in-law, not necessarily the same ones that filled out the survey, but a different, um, group of daughters-in-law and mothers in-law. The mothers in-law feel or hope to feel a lot closer to their daughters-in-law than the daughters-in-law report being with their mothers in-law. So parents-in-law in general, this was also true of fathers in-law and sons-in-law tend to describe the relationship as better than the children in-law do, than the sons-in-law do about the fathers in-law and that the daughters-in-law do, about the mothers in-law. So there's this interesting issue around are parents-in-law trying to create a closer relationship by saying it's closer, or do they actually feel it's closer? Is this, is this more of an aspirational kind of closeness that, um, I think it's important for people to consider and we can get into later on in this talk about, you know, what people can do to improve their relationships. But those are some of the ones that we've seen.

Dana Rampolla: 14:49

That's interesting. That kind of stood out.

Jena Frick: 14:52

I, I kind of have like a, a meet the parents kind of related question for you. So I, I know Valentine's Day is a few, is a few days away. Let's say that a couple gets engaged and at that point, neither one of them has met their partner's family yet. Uh, where do they start to make it a healthy relationship with the in-laws, and maybe more importantly, what should the parents do in that situation?

Michael Woolley: 15:16

So that's a terrific question. As a matter of fact, you guys brought this question to us when you contacted us and said, why don't you come on and talk about Valentine's Day? And I'll admit, my first response was Valentine's Day. I, it took, I, I had to sort of figure out how to get from Valentine's Day to in-laws. But the connection is clear and it's, and it's strong. Here's one of my answers. So when a couple falls in love, they see each other, right? As a matter of fact, all these romantic poems, oh, I only have eyes for you. I walk in the room, you're the only person I see. They're totally focused on each other. And that's the way it should be. And that's the way it is. So you may go to your in-law's house, but the person in the room you are most conscious of is this person you're in love with. If you are that person and you are with your in-laws, with your spouse to be, you are bride or bride groom, um, look up, look up at your in-laws and be curious about who they are, what they think, what they like, what they do. They're the ones who raise this person you're deeply in love with. And so they have some responsibility for creating this person that you are so infatuated by. And, and start early being curious about who they are. Create personalized relationships with them. Um, because I think we heard what happens is a lot of times people don't really get to know their in-laws until a ways. Into the marriage sometimes when problems have crept up. So preempt that, be curious about who they are, give them time and tension and energy. And then Geoff talked about the genderized stuff. So here's a couple

other things we learned and, and this, these are old sort of stereotypes, but they're true in the data we collected. Men like to do things together, that's how they bond. They go to the football game, they go fishing, right? Women like to spend time together and get to know each other and talk and interact. Um, and creating time and space to do that is the way to create good in-law relationships.

Charles Schelle: 17:32

obviously the. Couple the, the bride- and groom-to-be also want to start establishing healthy boundaries. Right? And so where do you start with that? So, so now you've gotten to know them. Maybe you're doing the bonding, maybe you're doing the talking. What's, what's the approach to, to start kind of figure out everyone's roles?

Geoff Greif: 17:51

That's a great question too. So, let's, you know, put this into a little bit of a broader context. There are apparently 2 million people, 2 million marriages that are formed every year. That's, that's obviously 4 million people, uh, are getting married. Uh, speaking of Valentine's Day, apparently, uh, 5% of proposals happen on Valentine's Day. So let's call it the most romantic day of the, of the year. Um, and what happens with that marriage is that three new families are, are born. Uh, so I'll use myself as a, as an example just to speed this up. When I got engaged, I was forming a new marriage with my wife, but I was joining her family. And sh reshaping that family as she was joining my family of origin, my siblings and parents, and reshaping that. So three families are forever changed when there's a, um, a marriage cuz of the additions of people. We could also talk about change from subtraction in case the person that that I had married wanted to, uh, pull away from her family, or in case she wanted to help me, or I wanted help in pulling away from my family. That would be a shift in family by subtraction, not just by the, the addition. So there are many different formulations and one side of that may be added to the other side of, that may be sub subtracted from. But speaking broadly about this whole topic, most of the relationships that we studied were positive. So we wanna make sure we frame this conversation as saying there were very few, we're guessing 15 to 20% of the people that we interviewed, and these were anonymous interviews so people could feel free. If, if I'm interviewing somebody who I know, they may want to sugarcoat or, or, or hide the, the depth of their despair in any relationship, um, or not say anything bad that their spouse may, may hear. Um, these are people that were, were totally anonymous and so we estimate there's about 15 to 20% that are in deep trouble. A lot of these relationships on the extreme end, um, there are some really fabulous relationships where women and men find children in law or parents in law that meet long, uh, unmet needs. Maybe if I grew up without a father and I can attach to my wife's father, that helps to, to really help me to become a more secure and, and healthy human being. So that's another thing that happens. But the broad group is 70%, we can say 65% say, you know, I, I understand my, my father-in-law and mother-in-law. Yeah. I don't, I'm not crazy about 'em, but if they keep my wife happy and remember, we need to look at the spouse as the key to many of these relationships. So most of these work in a mature, um, way of thinking about how these relationships work is in fact that, yeah, I get my mother-in-law, father-in-law. I don't mind them. Do I always wanna hang out with them? No, but if it makes my wife happy, sure. I'm happy to do it up to a point. Um, so I think it's important to frame that most of these relationships do work and some work fabulously well.

Dana Rampolla: 21:25

So I think your question, Jena, was really interesting. I mean, I, I'm a mom of five adult children and I cringe thinking that maybe I would be meeting the in-laws for the first time, like the day before the wedding or after they get engaged because I grew up in an environment where everyone knew everybody. You know, you had mentioned something in, um, an earlier conversation, Michael, and I think it was the concept of scattered families that nowadays so many people live in different states

from their state of origin or their state of birth where they grew up, you know, whether it's for job or college. So when I'm looking at, at my family, for example, um, spin the wheels for personal therapy session now, but, you know, I, I come from a little bit of a different generation where we, we either went to the same high schools or we grew up in a neighboring town. So if I don't, if my mom didn't know my boyfriend or my future fiance, uh, you know, aunt Betty in the neighboring town knew of him through school. So, so, because we're all kind of spread out now, tell me how do we, how do we navigate that? How do we set ourselves up for success in these extended family roles? And then also, is it important that we try to be friends with these in-laws who might be in different states?

Michael Woolley: 22:42

Well, that is a great and, and, and very complicated question. Um, and I, I have two or three things that I, I wanna try to touch on here. First, one of the things we learned, and we didn't actually go looking for this. One of the things we did learn is that many of these, uh, as Geoff described, vertical relationships between children and law and parents-in-law, um, had developed, uh, ways to be together and communicate using the internet. They Facebooked, they did, uh, video calls. Um, and that was a way to help bridge, uh, that dynamic you're talking about where so many young people now, um, don't live where they grew up and therefore they're having children or each of their parents and in-laws that are a distance, uh, from those children. Um, and so they create these opportunities to spend time together online. Um, the other thing that happens is, um, there's this dynamic where let's say one set of in-laws parents, grandparents are, are near the couple. One is ways away. It's easy to sort of assume the one that's close by is going to have the better relationship, um, which isn't necessarily true. And there's a couple things that I can add to that. One of the things we found is the, to an extent, the more time that the children spend with in-laws the better the relationship. But there is a breakover point approaching seeing each other on an, you know, approaching daily basis where the quality of the relationship actually starts to suffer. Um, that you can have you're, you, you can be around your children as an in-law too much. Um, and, and Dana, you mentioned boundaries before. Thi this is a critical dynamic that I'm, I'm glad we're touching on. Geoff talked about this new family that's formed by the couple and two families that are forever changed. That new family has to have space. It has to have boundaried space to build that new family because those two in that couple, that other person in that couple should become the most important primary person in that person's life. And that's going to cause friction with mother and fathers in-law who might have previously be like, you know, this, if, uh, let's say the, the, the, uh, uh, a woman in this couple might have been a daddy's girl and that was a primary relationship or the, the, the, uh, regardless of the makeup of the couple, by, by, by gender, et cetera, they may have had primary relationships, one with one or the other of the parents, and the members of the couple need to turn to each other and work together to create this space for this relationship to develop and get strong. And last, and this is the hardest part, Dana, for the in-laws: The in-laws need to allow that to happen. I just thought of an anecdote from some of the qualitative data in the book. This mother-in-law we interviewed, , she was a mother-in-law to a daughter-in-law and the son was very sick and in the hospital and he asked for something. The mother-in-law, and the daughter-in-law ran to get this thing that the son wanted. And the mother-in-law had this insight, I need to let her do this. And when she did that, it was like she had this insight that she needs to allow this, this spouse of her son, she loved so much to be that primary person.

Charles Schelle: 26:32

A little bit of this is, based on your preference, do you want to be the set of in-laws that want to be tapped for everything cuz you're close by? Or would you like to be at a distance where you swoop in for an extended weekend and, and have your time and, and leave?

Geoff Greif: 26:49

Yes, in fact, and that's the situation in which I find myself, both of my, my daughters live in, in, in Boston and they have their in-laws right nearby and so sometimes, We feel like we're missing out on the daily stuff, but when we go up there, we stay at their, at their, their homes. So we have a more intense 48 hours and see them at all, all hours of the, of the day. And I think sometimes, uh, the in-laws up there that maybe live between five minutes and 45 minutes away might, might miss some of that. Uh, a lot of this is, I guess stuff around personal boundaries too. How much space do we each need? Do I wanna, um, go from my somewhat solitary existence in Baltimore with my wife and jump into um, eight people up there? Cause uh, each of my daughters has, has two kids. So it's a lot of trying to figure out, uh, who feels comfortable with whom, how well do I get along with my sons-in-law? By the way, it's easier for grandparents. I hate to tell you this, Dana, if they have daughters, cause they get more access to grandchildren. Um, if we talk in general about men's and women's roles and women tend to be the gatekeepers to children, still more than men are, that a lot of mothers in-laws struggle with, um, figuring out how to interact with their daughter-in-law and hence the grandchildren. And that's another topic we can get to at some point.

Jena Frick: 28:29

I kind of wanna back it up to what you were talking about, um, as far as positive relationships versus negative relationships with in-laws. And you had said that it was kind of a, a smaller percentage of people who reported in your survey having a, a not so easy or happy relationship with their in-laws. And I kind of wanna talk a little bit more about that and zoom in on that statistic. So if, if the relationships with in-laws are complicated or contentious or maybe disappointing, uh, should couples be trying to fix them or is it just a matter of trying to find a way to coexist with them?

Michael Woolley: 29:03

Wow. Okay. That's a really good question. So are you guys familiar with, uh, the Dostoevsky quote? "Happy families are all basically happy in a similar way, but unhappy families are all unhappy in their own particular way." Um, that, that was incredibly smart and insightful, and it applies here. Um, the families that are very unhappy, uh, with their in-laws, there's often prior family relationship struggles that are getting echoed by and playing out in the in-law relationships. I can think of one where, uh, a father who was not around much when a daughter was growing up, and that gets echoed in difficult, conflictual, complicated relationships now with his adult daughter and his son-in-law and the grandkids, which she forgets their birthdays and things like that. So, some of this, and we talk about this in the book, that if you, if you wanna fix problems in your family, the first thing you have to do is take a really tough look at the trajectory and the history and, and how you got there. Um, because sometimes these struggles, uh, take a long time to get, uh, As, uh, awkward and difficult as they are. Um, there, there's also situations that come up. I, I was talking earlier about boundaries and saying the in-laws need to sort of accept this new person and the family and allow this couple to have some space problems occur when, uh, that is, is not allowed to happen. And one of the four in-laws, um, is looking for, uh, the relationship they had with their son or daughter to continue as it was for them to be the first person they call when they're upset or need to talk to somebody. For example, to talk to your child every day when they're after they're married, is probably not realistic. Um, and what that creates is what we call in the family therapy field, a triangle where three people, one on each corner of the triangle, Have some conflict or imbalance that takes over a couple legs of that triangle. So if a father-in-law wants to talk to a daughter-in-law every day, and that is somehow interfering in the time, attention, and energy that that daughter-in-law gives to her spouse, um, that's putting that daughter-in-law. Uh, it it on the, the sharp corner of that triangle, creating conflict between that father-in-law and that daughter-in-law, spouse, um, and that that's something to watch out for. As he said, 10 or 15% of these families had real serious struggles. Um, and they all, they all looked different.

And the solutions are more complicated for those families. We can give sort of insights. I talked about being curious about your in-laws. In-laws, allowing space for this new person, letting them have a role in holidays when everybody has the, you know, this person makes the mashed potatoes this person makes the dressing will create space for this new person so they feel included. This mother-in-law we interviewed was invited by the soon-to-be daughter-in-law to go with the daughter-in-law and the daughter-in-law's mother to look at wedding dresses. This is not something mother-in-laws are typically included in that started that relationship off on a great start, uh, where that mother-in-law was included. In other words, it, these triangles can be conflict. They can also be exclusion. These two people are leaving this person out. Let these new people in, include them, include the father-in-law, include the mother-in-law.

Geoff Greif: 32:57

Again, you're marrying two different styles of families very often. One-sixth of marriages now in the US are interracial or, or interethnic. One out of three are interfaith. So you've got people coming from perhaps not necessarily pretty different backgrounds at least, or backgrounds as perceived by society and perhaps by them. So you have to figure out, uh, a whole new way of, of working. And there are also very distinct styles of communication in families that we found in our research. There are families where, For example, if I have an issue with my son-in-law or my father-in-law, I could go directly to him. So that would be a direct line of communication. But there are other families where no, if I have an issue with one of them, I should check it out with my, with my wife first, cuz she's the one that's more family linked with her father-in-law. So we found both types of communication style. Something where everything went through the sibling group and then got distributed to the, to the, the children-in-law that have married into that sibling group and others where no, if I have a direct relationship with my father-in-law, for example, I should just be able to go to him. And both those styles work. We found one tended to work better than the other, but it doesn't mean the other does not work. But you may have people coming from very different styles and if I marry into, um, a family with a more closed communication style and I start to, to come up with a very open communication style that's gonna make them feel uncomfortable, and I'm gonna feel uncomfortable with their response, even though it's really more maybe of a cultural thing or just a communication style thing. The other issue is, as we keep on coming back to it, when you become engaged to somebody, how closely do you really interview them? Uh, the person you're love with about their relationships with their mother and their father, and their siblings and their grandparents. So we need to remember that a lot of in-law relationships, Uh, do come, for example, if we're talking about my in-law relationships, I'm watching my wife about how she deals with her parents, and I'm gonna support her in that, uh, or maybe, maybe urge her to do something else slightly different. But I'm working through her, I'm taking my cue from, from her very often. And so we can't forget the role that a son or daughter has in in green lighting or in red lighting relationships. And also whether or not I was even attracted to my wife in part because she was close with her family and I wanted to be close with mine and I needed help with that or she wasn't close with her family. And I wanted support in staying distant from my own family. So we're attracted to people based on a lot of things. And part of that attraction in some people or in all of us may be how we perceive they're gonna help us to formulate a new family and deal with our current and old family of origin.

Charles Schelle: 36:11

Yeah. And, and we've talked a lot about fathers and sons and daughters and mothers in-laws, but we also have brothers- in-laws and sisters- in-laws and, and that adult sibling bond can be strong. You've also wrote a book on adult sibling relationships. I'm sure maybe some of this bled into, you know, the

other field. So, you know, how can adult siblings be good in-laws, especially if there are multiple siblings.

Michael Woolley: 36:37

The first thing I thought of as you were asking the question, uh, I mentioned earlier that we interviewed this set of brothers, four brothers. If you, if you can imagine a worst case scenario for conflict, it's probably four brothers. Um, and they get along. They respect each other. They like each other. One of the insights they gave us is we always assume good intentions and the best possible, uh, meaning behind things they say to each other. Everyone's experienced misinterpreting something someone said. Um, and that creating conflict that gets wound up well, they always assume the best. And what was really fascinating is, and we, this wasn't planned, we're interviewing the, the, the four of them. Their, their wives were all there sitting in chairs back behind them and ano a secondary outcome of these four brothers liking each other, respecting themselves. Oh, by the way, they weren't always like that. They talked about fighting physically and all kinds of things when they were young, but they somehow all evolved to have this deep appreciation. For what are these longest relationships in most of our lives, these people are around when we're children, and they tend to be around, well into our, our own, uh, uh, later years. They're longer than our spouses, longer than our parents. The people that know us the best, which is a very double edge blade. They know how to say things that cut the deepest, and they, and they know what to say when it's most needed and in, in the worst situation. But these guys loved each other and you know what happened? Their wives ended up being strong tightly a cluster of friends as well. Um, we, we in fact made a video of these guys and I, and I think they're a walking lesson on how to have strong, positive relationships with your siblings. But we also saw siblings and interviewed siblings who were at the other end of the spectrum who were cut off. And, and that's the family research term for folks who, for whatever reason, don't even speak anymore. Um, and it's a sad situation, but siblings get in that. I was talking before about problems in family echo into the next generations. You know, the sins of the father are revisited on the son's kind of idea, which is absolutely true. Kids who grow up in abusive neglectful households, even though they are a collective set of victims of that, it's very sad to see. But later in life,, that abuse and neglect, that trauma ends up having a very negative, profound effect on their relationships as adults. Um, and I, I mean, as a clinician, I, I've worked with folks to try to mend these cutoff relationships and it's very painful and it's very hard. It takes one person to be vulnerable. To reach out, to step up, to take a chance. Um, I, I will say there are times when cutoff relationships are, are a legitimate choice on the part of the person's cutoff because the person they've cut off is toxic to the point of whatever they may get from recreating a relationship does not justify what they have to deal with. I worked with families, it's startling, but they don't even remember what it was that cut them off. What happened was so long ago, and I would argue so insignificant, that it's lost to time. They just know we never invite him to holidays. We never talked to him. He's not a part of anything. And I guess I'm gonna end with saying this. As children, we live in the same house. We share the same bathroom , we share the same family struggles and trauma and crises. We need as adults to for forgive each other for whatever we said or did back then. Um, ah, one more thing. We regress when we're around our family of origin, and this is a profound thing to understand. When you're 25, even 35, and you go home for Thanksgiving, you might find yourself behaving as if you're 16 . When we get out of our family, we continue to evolve and mature in the world. We create new relationships, not just spousal like we're talking about and new in-laws and other families, but friends, colleagues. But somehow when we go back with our family, we go back to being the person we were. And I've told this to many people and they come back and they go, I didn't believe you when you said that. And then I watched myself do it. So here's the lesson. When you go be with your family, Try to be aware of that and try to show them who you are now and don't start behaving like the difficult 16

year old you were. And try to see your siblings as adults for who they are now, and try to learn about who they are now and, and learn to appreciate and love who, who they are now instead of interacting with them the way they were when you went our way to college at 18 or went away to work on an oil rig at 18 and they were the annoying little 13 year old little brother, because that's not who that person is anymore.

Dana Rampolla: 42:01

Well, I just have to laugh when my children, who are all adults, all with jobs, all responsible, come in and the first thing they do is go to the refrigerator to check and see what's in there. Um, let's go back and talk a little bit. I, I did hear your interview that you both did with Tom Hall on WYPR's "Midday" a while back, and I'm curious, um, and Geoff, you mentioned this before, the situation where you live here in the Baltimore area, your daughters live out of state. I'm in that same situation. Um, so hearing you talk about kind of the grandmother of choice or the family who's there all the time versus the family who just drops in and has this wonderful weekend. Um, what, what is your advice for the distanced grandmother And yes, I am personally personalizing this. I mean, you mentioned FaceTiming earlier and things like that, , what does your research show in terms of making those relationships work?

Geoff Greif: 42:54

That's a great question and it's one we're all gonna struggle with and it'll change as children age, as the grandchildren age because, uh, grandparent with a 6-month-old is very different than a grandparent with a 6-year-old or a grandparent with a 16-year-old who's gonna say to me when I come up, oh, hi granddad nice to see you. Now let me go back to my phone, or my friends. Right? So we have to understand that their need for us, their connection to us naturally changes with time. I think if you've got the in-laws living in town and you're out of town, I have a great piece of advice that worked for me, which I learned from one of the interviews that we did and that one of our students did. This, um, student interviewed a, I'll say a father-in-law who said, you know, the other grandparents always come up in town but never wanna, wanna see us. Um, so let's, let's take a look at that. So , if my children's in-laws are in Boston, uh, near them, and I fly up to Boston with my wife on a Friday afternoon and I'm leaving Sunday afternoon, I wanna see my children and my grandchildren. I don't wanna spend time, even though they're, they're all very nice. I don't wanna spend time with my son-in-law's parents, especially. I will if I have to, but I'm not flying up there to see them, quite frankly. So I learned from reading about that parent-in-laws or that grandparent's point of view, what I needed to do. And a few years ago, I flew up a day sooner specifically to meet with the other father-in-law with my daughter's father-in-law. And so by spending time with him, I A) got to know him better. B) I was helping out my daughter and C) I was relating better to my son-in-law. Because I was touching a number of different systems and I wasn't being, being fake and, and doing it. Uh, he, he's a nice guy, just that I hadn't arranged my time before that. So I think it is also important for grandparents like us, Dana, to be thinking, uh, potential grandparents to be thinking about, you know, what do I do also to forge a relationship to the extent that I can with the person that's really playing an important role in, in my grandchild's life and trying to support them and hopefully they'll be trying to support me. The other thing is you can't possibly treat, um, your children the same and you can't possibly treat the grandparents the same, or the parents-in-law the same. Somebody's gonna get an extra five minutes or a \$5. You know, candy bar while the other one is getting a \$4 candy bar. You can't raise children exactly the same. And just to add to the former statement of Michael, none of us grows up in the same family. We all grew up in different families. I've never had myself as a brother. I don't know that experience. Uh, my parents were older when they had me than when they had my older siblings and so on. So there's also this always changing family. My parents' relationships may have changed with each other and their friends and with work and so on. So, um, if

you're nimble, um, and you are adaptive and you're open to new people coming into your life, so part of what we talk about in our book is. Hey folks, you gotta be open to the fact that families change over time and you want them to change over time and that's healthy. Expect it, embrace it, it's gonna happen. You might as well go with the flow and that's what you wanna have happen. You want your children to grow up and, and leave home and form intimate adult relationships if they decide to have children. Fine. Uh, but you know, that is expected and that's great and, uh, be open to it and hopefully you came from a family that was open to it. So you have experience in being open to new relationships that are very close to your family.

Jena Frick: 47:06

Something that you all had brought up a little earlier was about how, um, you noticed that there were a lot of different cultural differences in the couples and families that, uh, you had interviewed in your research. And, um, I wanna get into some advice and responses you received from those families with cultural differences, specifically for couples, um, in the LGBTQ plus community. Uh, what are some things that you've heard from those families about acceptance and welcoming?

Geoff Greif: 47:32

One of the things that we found is that, um, one of the issues for parents in law is that some of them had accepted the fact that their own child was, uh, either gay or or lesbian. Obviously there, there are, there, there are are other descriptors we could use. We'll stick with, uh, with gay or, or lesbian, but it could be queer plus, et cetera. Just wanna acknowledge that. Um, It's one thing to accept that your own child is gay or lesbian. Uh, for many parents, it's something else to accept the fact that they now have a partner who is, is gay or lesbian, and that person is now in your home part of your life. But one of the people that we interview said the real knock was coming on having a wedding. And they talked about the fact that, that it was very public for the parents, um, who were, who had adapted, had accepted the fact that their daughter, in this case was a lesbian, but had a really hard time saying, do we have to have a wedding? Do we have to do this in front of the community? Now that, that occurred a few years ago and there's been a huge shift of acceptance in the United States as all the polls show and as everyone knows, doesn't mean that there's is universal acceptance, cuz we know there is definitely not universal acceptance. There are still numbers of, of hate, hate crimes against people that are LGBTQ plus. So we need to be aware of that too. A lot of parents have fears around those hate crimes. Uh, we interviewed people that had stopped going to churches, houses of worship because of the position taken by people in the church or by the people in, in charge of the house of, of, of worship. So, um, there were also people that dropped friends because th they could not e accept their, uh, the, their, their child or had sort of taken a, a position against, against gay and lesbian relationships. So that's from the parents' perspective. A lot of the children-in-law that we spoke to, and we have a chapter specifically in our book on, uh, on these two populations. Um, the children also felt that they were sometimes, um, marrying people that were not as open as they were, so, um, with their own family. So they had to figure out how to navigate marrying into a family that was less accepting than their own family was, or how to navigate the reverse that they came from. Um, Uh, a close family, but they were all of a sudden marrying into a very open family. Again, it goes back to that may be part of the attraction of people, uh, to, uh, to other people. If I'm attracted to somebody who's close with their family, that certainly would, would apply here too.

Charles Schelle: 50:31

For, other cultural considerations, there's a fantastic conversation to be had about Black fathers in-law and, and sons in-laws that your School of Social Work colleague Erika Lewis has researched along with, um, Baylor University Assistant Professor Brianna Lemmons. I actually got to talk to them a couple years ago when I was on the School of Social Work beat and, and a quick plug, I'll get to talk

to them again. We'll have a bonus episode on the Pulse speaking to the two of them to dive into what they found. And we're gonna release that on Valentine's Day to make it a little bit more special.

Michael Woolley: 51:02

So, so I just wanted to say that,, the article, Erika Lewis and Brianna Lemmons did I, I was, I was part of that. Um, and just terrific bit of qualitative research. What they did is they took a set of, um, interviews with, uh, Black son-in-laws about their Black father-in-laws, and did a, a another analysis beyond the study that, that, that Geoff and, and I had done. And it, I I wanted to share something that's really interesting. Geoff was talking about the struggles of, uh, in-laws in, in, in, uh, same sex couple. There's dynamics that play across all families, but they play out very differently. One of the dynamics is, parents have certain internalized anticipated expectations for who their child is gonna be, what they're gonna do, who they're gonna marry, what kind of life they're gonna have. And one of the things that in-laws and parents struggle with is when that is not the life that child chooses or who they want to become or what they wanna do, or who they want to love and marry. Um, and in these Black son-in-law, father-in-law relationships one of the, one of the things that, that Brianna and, Erika and I found in the analysis was, Black families who are traditionally marginalized don't have the same access to resources and opportunities and education, et cetera. Um, fathers in-law are looking for their sons-in-law of their daughters to come in and assume the role of creating safety, protecting, taking care of the family, um, against these historical struggle that Black families have in America. And that until a son-in-law demonstrates validate that he can do that. Um, whether by showing up at, uh, events and being that guy or he, or, or the father-in-law, hearing that from other people, um, that father-in-law and son-in-law relationship struggle. Until the father-in-law feels like that son-in-law can be the kind of, uh, protector of the family that, that he expects. And so there's profound lessons there for children in-law. Show your parents-in-law who you are, and for, for in-laws you might need to let go of the deep internalized expectations you had for who your child was gonna be and who they were going to spend their life with. Um, and look at who they did choose and learn to love and cherish us and get to know that person.

Charles Schelle: 53:30

So you mentioned earlier that you're doing research on interracial marriages, right? What are you finding out so far there?

Geoff Greif: 53:37

We've, uh, done a number of, of articles that actually have, have come out, um, two of them on raising, uh, multiracial or biracial children. And the two that are also out or coming out on, uh, Black women married to white men and white women married to black men. Our general study is looking at inter marriage, be between all races, but we focus some of the early writing on the one that seems to, of course historically attract the most attention in the United States Black, white marriage. Some of the things we found about raising biracial, multiracial children, because one of the parents can be more than than one race, of course, which would make the children, um, multiracial. Um, is that. You may have children that do not look the same skin color, do not look alike. So there can be confusion when showing up uh, someplace with one parent or both parents, there may be a child that does not look like the the parent, uh, in terms of skin color. So when going places, they are not assumed to be together. All these are anywhere between a microaggression and a macro aggression. We make assumptions about people based who on who we think they should be with, and even forgetting about the children. When a, a biracial and interracial married, um, couple goes to, to a restaurant, unless they're holding hands, um, a person might think that they aren't even together as a, as a couple if they're waiting in, in line to get a, to get a table. So, Uh, these couples are often and their families constantly on guard. It depends a great deal upon the part of the country in which, uh, they

live though. So, uh, people on the east coast and west coast, um, in urban settings, Cause Maryland has, has great diversity too in its approaches to the life between Baltimore and the Washington suburbs and the western part of the state. Um, you can have a, a very comfortable feeling being around, um, and out in the neighborhood, in the community, or you may think. Gee, we're the only ones here. And why are people staring at us? Um, other research has shown that people in interracial couples might avoid traveling together on a bus. They may, they may go on the bus and sit apart to avoid any kind of attention. They may have the white person be the one that returns something to a store, um, even though it's the other, uh, person of Color maybe that has, has bought the item. There are, there are all kinds of ways that these couples have learned to, to, to navigate, uh, uh, their, their lives. And they go from the, uh, extremely wise, uh, ones that we've interviewed. We've got people that have given very good advice about how to react. And it's all highly personal, how one chooses to react, how you read a situation. Do you ignore it? Do you pay attention to it? Do you not even. Uh, frame it as being something that is a microaggression. You just go on with your life. So there are hundreds of different reactions that people have found that are effective in working with it, um, with microaggressions or outright um, uh, racist responses.

Dana Rampolla: 57:13

Well, we've covered a lot of, of topics in, in our chat this afternoon, so thank you both for being on and I'm, I'm certain probably between the five of us we'll hear of someone who gets engaged in the upcoming days and we'll be sure to tell them to listen to get some good tips on how to make their new in-law relationships work. Um, likewise, you've done a lot of interviews and blogs on this topic, so we will make sure our listeners can connect to those through our website. Um, and we'll include the link to Geoff's appearance on Face-to-Face with President Bruce Jarrell from 2020, the "Midday" interview that we mentioned, and of course, the link to your book. Thank you gentlemen again for being on the program.

Geoff Greif: 57:53

Thank you so much. A lot of fun.

Michael Woolley: 57:55

Thank you, Dana. Thank you, Jena. Thank you, Charles.

Jena Frick: 58:03

The UMB Pulse with Charles Schelle, Dana Rampola, and Jena Frick is a U M B Office of Communications and Public Affairs production edited by Charles Schelle, sound engineering by Jena Frick, marketing by Dana Rampola.